

The Other 95

In freshman year biology class in 2011, I began to feel the rolls of nausea consume me as fetal pigs were distributed among lab tables like bread at an Italian restaurant. Twenty five or so fourteen year olds were given the task of slicing open baby pigs in order to find certain organs and check them off of our long to-do lists. If you had told my science teacher at the time that I would be vegan in a couple years, nothing would have surprised her less. As my eyes wandered the room, avoiding looking at what was right in front of me (I had made a deal with my lab partners that I would do any written work to compensate for not even picking up a scalpel), I saw sunlight gleaming off metal. I looked over at my classmate who was several tables over from me to see him pick up the largest dissection tool and begin, and I do not use this term lightly, *hacking* away at this fetal pig. Little bits of pig whizzing through the air and splatting on his goggles like bugs on a windshield. Pure glee in his eyes. I lost it.

I was hyperventilating and crying, and I couldn't even really put into words at the time what I had seen and why it had shaken me so. But what I do remember is that my teacher was immediately by my side and helped me regulate. Now, if there were multiple other pig-hackers in the room, she simply could not have done that. In fact, in that situation, that poor woman would not have been able to do anything without turning into Elasti-Girl from the Incredibles. Flash forward to today. I just finished my second year of teaching yesterday, and I can confidently say turning into Elasti-Girl from the Incredibles was precisely what I was expected to do. And spoiler alert, Success Criteria: Not Met.

The reason the pig-hacking experience comes to the forefront of my mind is because it is such a stark contrast to what we see everyday in classrooms today. The children who are deeply affected by the 5%'s actions are not, and cannot, be tended to. I was one of the 95% who did not showcase extreme behavioral disruptions in the classroom, and this is for them. Education today has failed the 95% by catering to the 5%. The least restrictive environment (LRE) for the 5% becomes the *most* restrictive environment for the other 95%. And this was something that I tried to express in *many* different ways to anyone who would listen but could not seem to get across.

Taking a step back, I know times are different now than 10 years ago. I know that technology has taken over children's (and adult's) lives. I had a child in my classroom with autism who needed a chromebook to be able to eat his lunch. I know that Covid had a detrimental effect on these kids' development. I know schools are severely understaffed. But at the end of the day, we are failing 95% of kids, in my experience, who are coming to school, and with reasonable supports put in place, want to and are able to learn. And guess what? We are also in many ways failing the 5% by allowing them to stay in the general education classroom. The only thing they are learning is that actions do not have consequences, and accountability is a thing of the past.

My days for the past two years consisted of behavioral management. This is not news to any teachers out there. But had students who presented severe behavioral disruptions day in and day out been pulled from the general education learning environment, my days would have consisted of a whole lot more teaching. It was mind blowing to me that our school's entire focus and priority was placed on maintaining this sense of a least restrictive environment for this handful of kids, all while sacrificing the other 95%. When I say that in these situations it becomes the most restrictive environment for the other 95%, I will elaborate. Constant verbal shoutouts and noises means students are unable to focus. Constant attempts to pick arguments with the teacher means the teacher has less time to teach the lesson. Constant walking out of the classroom to then knock (*bang* like we are on the Titanic and the hallway is quickly being submerged in below freezing water) on the door to be let back in means more interruption. But we have to let them back in. Over and over again. And this is only the *surface* of the behavioral problems I would see on a daily basis. If I were a student today, I would not have been successful. I would not have been able to deal with and overcome the constant interruptions and disruptions. I probably would have hated school. But because the 5% are the ones with the most needs, we forget that the 95% also have needs. And all of those needs are going unmet.

If I were a student today, I would have drawn many conclusions by now. One being that I didn't matter. If I were to have one bad day, it would go unnoticed or unaddressed because a few kids have *all* bad days. I would not get any of the teacher's attention because my teacher was always dealing with the same two or three kids in class who were all-consuming. Another take-away I would have would be that exhibiting bad behavior is the only way to get attention and feel seen and heard. Following directions is not rewarded with attention. Now, knowing myself, I would have just faded into the background and completely shut down. But there is also a percentage of students who are triggered by this severe behavior in a different way. They see that the only way to be seen and heard in the classroom is to join in, to some extent, with the 5%. And here you see how the problem spirals.

In today's day in age where there is an *obsession* (another word I am not using lightly) with data, it is nothing short of shocking to me that the data on extremely disruptive children is overlooked. Instead, administration is focused on data like attendance and enrollment, but here I digress. I could write so much more about how admin's selective listening is just as bad as some children's. Author Glennon Doyle talks about how the first step for positive change in your life isn't always knowing what the right answer is, but rather knowing that *this*? Is *not* it. Because at the end of the day, the goal of education is to, well, educate children. And in regards to the other 95%- Success Criteria: Not Met.